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ABSTRACT

Future research on mass media and mass communication organizations might profitably emphasize phenomenological methods (phenomenology being an interpersonal, subjective reality construction as contrasted to an objective, rationalistic, institutional reality construction). Some major phenomenological concepts important to such research were developed by Edmund Husserl and Alfred Schutz: (1) life-world, (2) typification, (3) intersubjectivity, (4) reflective nature of meaning, (5) the role of social science, (6) reduction, and (7) relevance. A few studies of mass media and mass communication organizations have been conducted using phenomenological categories or approaches, some self-consciously, others nevertheless effectively. Edward Jay Epstein, David L. Altheide, and Gaye Tuchman are among those few researchers to use phenomenological categories to do their work. Future research might extend such inquiry by intensifying the process of reduction (considering the internal logic of phenomena without regard to external context), or by applying the concept of typification (making sense of the life-world by imposing structure on it) more inclusively and systematically. Another promising area of phenomenological research is the communicator's perception of the audience. (TJ)

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Qualitative Studies Division

PHENOMENOLOGY AND MASS COMMUNICATION RESEARCH: AN UNCERTAIN PAST AND A PROMISING FUTURE

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

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Observers of the news process have frequently addressed the question of whether news is an "objective" product or a function of 'subjective' human interaction. As Tuchman (1972) indicates, the mere mention of the word "objectivity" stirs a sociological debate that began decades ago. The contending points of view are two conceptions of social reality: a rationalistic, institutional view; and a view of society as an interpersonal, subjective construction.

The theoretical outlines of a strictly objective social science were articulated by Durkheim in The Rules of Sociological Method (1938). Current examples of what is called "positivist" social science are often traced to Durkheim's maxim that 'social phenomena are things and ought to be treated as things (1938: 27)." Indeed, contemporary studies of media organizations owe a considerable debt to their positivist forebears. In search of "objectivity," researchers have sought to understand divergent media with self-imposed constructs. George Psathas (1973: 10) describes this activity as positing the existence of "empirical, existential objects," and setting out to "describe them in their particulars."

The "empirical object" that usually serves as the focus of research is the variable. To be sure, diverse variables can be isolated, and the interrelationships of variables which can be examined. With respect to organizational analysis, the options are fairly broad. Grunig (1973) refers to five schools of thought about organizations: scientific management; human relations; decision making; structural; and systems. The systems approach is

more inclusive than the others in the definition of variables, and specifically investigates their reciprocity. Nonetheless, each perspective is based on the assumption of things residing within the social environment.

The purpose of this paper is to introduce the major elements of another school of thought--the phenomenological--and to discuss the applications of phenomenological sociology to the study of media organizations. Although phenomenology and positivism arise from radically different assumptions, it is to be emphasized that phenomenology and science are not antithetical. In that context, this paper attempts to describe a systematic methodology for the study of subjective phenomena.

Modern phenomenology is largely attributable to an intellectual movement in Germany and Austria in the early part of the twentieth century. The leading figure in this movement was the German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), who sought to establish a philosophy as free as possible from preconditions and presuppositions. Positivism tends to view the physical and social worlds as operating similarly: Much as biological systems adhere to principles of chemistry and physics, social systems develop and evolve in scientifically predictable patterns. By contrast, phenomenology dichotomizes the physical and social worlds. It is assumed that human phenomena are not understood by the application of universal laws or by causal explanations. Husserl's philosophy is grounded in the day-to-day reality of the social actor's experience. The conscious human being lives and acts in a world which he must make

sense of. Consciousness is active and is always directed into the sphere of everyday life it must be consciousness of something.[1] Husserl believed that the sciences of man--"sociologism," "psychologism," and "historicism"--endeavored to explain human experience solely as dictated by external and internal forces.

According to Husserl (1967: 89), social reality rests upon the "self-evident data" of human interaction:

> Self-evident data are patient, they let theories chatter about them, but remain what they are. It is the business of theories to conform to data, and the business of theories of knowledge to discriminate the fundamental types, and to describe them in accordance with their distinctive nature.

The perspective of Husserl's writing is philosophical. The statement of a phenomenological social science was left to others, and this was the task that occupied Alfred Schutz (1899-1959).

Schutz was an Austrian-born sociologist who today is considered the father of American phenomenology. (Schutz came to the United States in 1939, and in that year joined the faculty of what was to become the New School for Social Research.) Much of Schutz' most significant work was not published until after his death. In this essay, some of Schutz' major phenomenological concepts will be summarized briefly. It should be noted that authorship is not necessarily implied. In many instances, Schutz has reinterpreted concepts originally formulated by Husserl:

Life-World

Individuals exist amid a complex of persons, objects, and events. The life-world is the totality of an individual's experiences. It is a universe shaped--moreover, constituted--by meaning:

> For the sociologist, his observational field, the social world, is not essentially structureless. It has a particular meaning and relevance structure for the human being living, thinking and acting therein. They have pre-selected and preinterpreted this world by a series of commonsense constructs which determine their behavior, define the goal of their actions, the means available for them--in brief, which help them find their bearings in their natural and socio-cultural environment and to come to terms with it (Schutz, 1964: 5-6).

Typification

Individuals make sense of the life world by the imposition of structure. Everyday interaction, for example, is characterized by the use of personal typifications--"a man," "a buyer," "an aggressive person," "middle income," "a Catholic." Language allows us to categorize our world in terms of its typical features, those features shared by persons or objects of the same category. These everyday classifications are "first-order constructs," as opposed to the "second-order constructs" of the observer who uses his own language in an effort to explain someone else's social reality.

Intersubjectivity

Social actors cannot exclude the life-world from the construction of meaning; as human beings, we are inherently interrelated. The social construction of reality is a process marked by mutuality.[2] The notions of communication as mediation or negotiation imply ongoing compromise and intersubjectivity. Schutz suggests that social existence is made possible by an individual's assumption that others are fundamentally similar to him and behave similarly. Intersubjectivity illustrates the "inherent sociality of consciousness and . . . the experience of

the world by self and others as a world in common (Phillipson, 1973: 125).

The Reflective Nature of Meaning

Meaning is not a property of experience itself. Experience is said to be meaningful when it becomes the object of human reflection. The reflective nature of meaning suggests that we make sense of today's experience by reflecting upon yesterday's. This process of looking back allows the social actor to look forward: to anticipate future events, 'project' them in terms of their typical characteristics, and ultimately plan for their occurrence. Experiences which are never reflected upon remain "prephenomenal" (Schutz, 1967: 70).

Commonsense Knowledge

Operating in the social world does not pose insuperable problems for most of us. We say 'good morning," write checks, wear clothes, purchase groceries. We have commonsense knowledge (or what Schutz calls "cookbook knowledge") of the way the world works.

The Role of Social Science

The role of the social sciences is defined by Schutz (1962: 53) as "obtaining organized knowledge of social reality"; the object of study is

> the sum total of objects and occurrences within the social cultural world as experienced by the commonsense thinking of men living their daily lives among their fellow-men, connected with them in manifold relations of interaction.

In practice, the phenomenological social scientist is engaged in uncovering what normally passes as commonsense knowledge in the social setting. According to David Walsh (1973: 33), phenomenological accounts "elucidate the everyday world" by systematically examining commonsense knowledge.

The Reduction

A phenomenological account attempts to consider the internal logic of phenomena as they are experienced in the "first order." The "reduction" is the basic method of study, requiring a suspension of preconstituted theories of behavior. The subject of study is "bracketed," and thus placed within the confines of its own life-world.

Relevance

Together with typification, relevance is a way in which individuals structure the social world. Relevance is the importance ascribed by an individual to aspects of specific situations and of his own life. In conjunction they form a system of relevances which may not always be clear and is capable of changing. If the source of relevances is a person's own motivations and objectives, they are said to be volitional. If these priorities are urged upon him by others in the social context, they are imposed. Common relevances are the product of direct interpersonal involvement. (Wagner, 1970, 321-2)

The remainder of this essay deals with the applications of phenomenology to the study of mass communication and mass media

organizations first, by way of assessing what has been done to date in a phenomenological framework, and second by attempting to draw lines along which phenomenological inquiry might be extended.

Studies of Media

Very few media studies have been done in the name of phenomenology. More frequently, authors have asked questions which coincide with phenomenological concerns, and have based their analyses upon direct observation of media practitioners. Participant observation is not the singly applicable mode of study (conceivably, one might focus on the transcripts of mass media messages) but it appears to be one of the most feasible. Participant observers may employ the phenomenological reduction by attempting to make the cultural setting "strange", by suspending prior knowledge of what individuals should and should not do in their respective social contexts (Truzzi, 1974).

In that sense, Edward Jay Epstein's News from Nowhere (1973) is not strictly phenomenological. Epstein frames his participant observation of news practices at NBC with the social, legal, and organizational exigencies of network news. Yet the theme of his book is phenomenological in spirit; that news is a socially constructed product, or more accurately, phenomenon. As such, news is more likely to reflect the constraints upon and values of those who construct it than some objective vision of the way things "really" are.

Within the life-world of a professional news organization, the ability to recognize and evaluate news is essentially commonsense

knowledge. News from Nowhere was the result of six months' observation of news operations and editorial conference at NBC. During that time, Epstein concentrated on the criteria which news personnel apply to the stories they may cover or are in the process of covering. The author was thus trying to reveal the sources of their "cookbook knowledge."

Epstein found that news professionals operationally define news in terms of the pressures they face. Among these are a directive from management to present the news in a dramatic fashion, with "structure and conflict, problem and denouement" (Epstein, 1973: 4); a mass audience that is believed to require news weighted toward matters of "general interest" (p. 40); a corporate superstructure that demands cost-efficiency from network correspondents and film crews; and a public-interest consideration that militates against the daring and controversial.

The title, News from Nowhere, is in some respects misleading. Epstein makes the point that the images seen on nightly newscasts do come from somewhere--they are in fact "pictures from an organization" and the people in it. What is phenomenological here is the author's orientation. The nature of news is explicated by observing how people do it. Professional roles are not viewed through the lens of what news is or should be in the abstract.

The second book we have chosen to discuss is David L. Altheide's Creating Reality: How TV News Distorts Events (1976). This is a study of television news at the local level, and on the whole broadens Epstein's findings as to the construction of news by media practitioners.

Altheide's work is a phemenological offshoot, reflecting in part his graduate training in the "existential sociology" of Jack D. Douglas and colleagues at the University of California at San Diego (Cf. Douglas and Rasmussen, 1975). At the outset of the book, Altheide deals with the related problems of objectivity and bias. The author contends that objectivity is a "perspective" that is fostered by political and ethical considerations. News, however, is generated from within its own perspective:

> TV news has its own context and interest in presenting events-as-news. In the process of presentation, the world of everyday life is transformed for news purposes. The effect is to take an event out of its familiar circumstances and surrounding and meanings, and then embed it in a foreign situation--a news report. Thus, in order to make events news, news reporting decontextualizes and thereby changes them. Thus, news stories will usually be irremediably biased--although the distorting influence of the news process can be illuminated, taken into account, and to that extent reduced. (Altheide, 1976: 24-25)

"Decontextualizing" is in Altheide's book the equivalent of "bracketing." The news perspective decontextualizes, then recontextualizes events within its own life-world. The choice of which stories to report is made by criteria which perhaps make sense in the news perspective, but are not congruent with an external world of events and objects. Creating Reality looks at newsroom conflicts and tensions, and how these are eventually projected via the daily newscast.

Unfortunately, Altheide extends his analysis to the national coverage of Watergate and the Eagleton controversy. It is not that these are unworthy or inappropriate topics, rather that his observations are sketchy, after-the-fact interpretations that lack the

force of participant observation. In any event, the author makes (1976: 195) an argument that "recognizing the architecture behind news images is necessary before alternative designs can be considered." The "architecture" of interpersonal, intersubjective constructions is at the heart of phenomenological sociology.

Another author to be discussed, Gaye Tuchman, is most clearly in the phenomenological tradition. In studies of "objectivity as strategic ritual," the construction of a network talk show, and news as a process of "routinizing the unexpected," she draws upon the insights of Schutz as well as those of modern American ethnomethodologists. Tuchman has found the concept of typification to be especially helpful.

In "Making News by Doing Work: Routinizing the Unexpected" (1973) Tuchman considers the classifications newsmen make in the process or ordering a flow of seemingly unexpected events. For the newsman, typification is an eminently practical exercise, spurred by the demands of technology, scheduling, and resource allocation. Newsmen in the Tuchman study see their world as composed of soft news, hard news, spot news, developing news, and continuing news. These typifications routinize events and organize work. The alleged "distortion" of events by the media, Tuchman points out, is a concept that is at odds with a phenomenological perspective (1976: 129):

> . . . 'Distortion' is itself a socially constructed concept. The construction of reality through redefinition, reconsideration, and reaccounting is an ongoing process. The newsmen's typifications indicate that it might be valuable to think of news not as distorting, but rather as reconstituting the everyday world.

Relying on the notion of typification, Tuchman has also observed the structuring of network talk shows (1974). The composition of these programs is based on a formula negotiated by the producer, director, and production staff. "One might even suggest," Tuchman writes, "that the natural history of the talk-show process is the natural history of locating, preparing, and choreographing the typified personal characteristics of celebrities for public consumption" (1974: 131).

In "Objectivity as Strategic Ritual: An Examination of Newsmen's Notions of Objectivity," Tuchman (1972) seeks to understand how newsmen define an "objective fact." The methodology is a blend of participant observation and focused interviews. The author concludes that objectivity is a functional stance--a "strategy through which newsmen protect themselves from critics" (1972: 676). Objectivity is not defined phenomenologically as a set or procedures, but as a perceived set of consciously employed behaviors.

Extensions of Tuchman's work (1978a, 1978b, 1978c) also focus on phenomenological concerns. A phenomenological notion of reflexivity as concerns media organizations (1978b, 1978c), through which journalists continuously reconstitute the reality of their newsgathering tasks and their definitions of what news is by continuous interaction with the same sets of news sources and the same sets of organizational superiors. Thus the content of news may vary from day to day, but the form of the product, the methods by which it is gathered, and from whom, remains fairly stable, while for the routine sources of news, what becomes news for the next day is in large part a reaction to what they have seen/heard

from the journalists' reports of that day. Among other results of such a process is a legitimation of the institutions both the journalists and the sources serve (1978c, Ch. 10).

While perhaps the most explicitly phenomenological of the writers reviewed, Tuchman herself disavows being labeled a phenomenologist, preferring to identify her brand of work as "interpretative," (Tuchman, 1978c, Ch. 9), a label she uses to encompass ethnomethodology, symbolic interactionism and Schutzian phenomenology.[3]

Two other works, neither of them distinctly phenomenological, however, might be commented upon because central findings therein are consistent with expectations a phenomenologist approaching the same workplaces might have.

In his study of the New York Times and Washington Post, Sigal (1973) relied heavily on participant observation of the staffs of those newspapers and found, more to his surprise than to the journalists', that front-page "play" of news stories was in some respects as dependent upon a complex web of negotiations between editors in news meetings with hierarchical equals who, at the same time, were called upon to remember that expectations of their individual staffs for preferential treatment over time, a front page 'balance' between staffs was achieved on the papers' front pages, a reconstruction in print of a 'reality" of a complex balance achieved organizationally.

While Muriel Cantor's (1971, 1974) interview studies of Hollywood television producers is distinctly not phenomenological but rather consistently an elaboration of reference group theory, her

findings, that producers can be pigeonholed into a typology consisting of film makers, writer-producers and old-line producers, types which cross age lines, production content lines and occupational training lines (1971: Ch. 4), make a convenient starting point for further research. If such producer-types do indeed exist, with more or less distinguishable political orientations and multiple realities of what 'proper' professional standards are, of what ultimate goals they should aspire to, as Cantor says they do, how did this come to be? Cantor's answer is that professional association and shared history distinguish the types from each other. But is the differentiation meaningful if television entertainment content is primarily marked by sameness? Her finding that political ideology, in its usual behavioralist research sense (1971: Ch. 4) of producers in each of her types was believed by its constituents to be separable from content is an important starting point, an indication that the phenomenological premise that the observation of the doing everyday work generates more valid research findings than asking questionnaire items about how the work is constituted.

Extending Phenomenological Inquiry

It is evident that researchers could intensify the process of reduction prior to entering the social scene. The phenomenological observer is compelled as Walsh (1973: 31) notes, to "treat the procedures of the everyday world as anthropologically strange." Historical and legal context are significant only to the extent that they are operationalized in communicative behavior. A likely

consequence of "making things strange" is an initial period of confusion and perhaps frustration. Yet entering an alien culture should not be free of difficulty.

In addition, the concept of typification can be applied in a much more inclusive--and at the same time systematic--manner. How do communicators typify themselves through the language they use? In an objective or static fashion, corporate and occupational titles typify the members of an organization. On the staff of a magazine, for example, the "managing editor" is designated as one who manages; the "design consultant" as one who consults on matters of design. In a more phenomenological view, however, everyday decisions establish an ongoing chain of command, and generate typifications of self.

Another central concern of the phenomenological observer of media should be the communicator's perception of an audience. It may be that the audience is taken for granted, and is thus a "phenomenal given."

> That which is taken-for-granted thus becomes fundamentally problematic for phenomenological sociology, for it is an inherent feature of members' reality-constituting activity. Ethnomethodologists have already begun the investigation of the 'given' nature of the social world for its members and this provides one way into revealing the principles according to which we organize our daily life (Phillipson, 1973: 147).

Is the audience conceptualized in terms of editorial content ("hard news types")? Or is the process one of categorizing editorial matter with relation to a perceived audience (a "blue collar story")?

Throughout a phenomenological inquiry, the social actors must be allowed to locate themselves in the social world by their

communicative behavior--principally vocabulary. Unfolding the nature of language in the life-world presents further possibilities for compiling organized data. The media studies we have reviewed only hint at these linguistic possibilities. Nor do these studies fully develop the notion of "relevance." Beyond the questions of explicit and implicit criteria for judgment, how does the individual communicator arrange his priorities? What type of story would a reporter "go to the wall" for against the protestations of an editor?

The yield of phenomenological research may be a realization that media are a less monolithic social force than may have been believed at one time. For example, market research or audience analysis might emerge as an individualized process occurring within the organization. The art department designs a magazine while analyzing the needs and interest of the editorial staff; the editorial product is the result of analyzing the desires of corporate vice-presidents; the advertising agency adjusts as much to the client as to an assumed readership. Ultimately, what one might see is self-actualization by mass media--the corporation not so much producing a product, but constituting itself.

Nor must the phenomenologically-oriented researcher restrict himself or herself to media organizations and their employees. Behavioralist approaches to audience-effects research, despite important recent contributions to British and European uses-and-gratifications scholars (Cf. Blumler and Katz, 1974) may misapprehend the nature even of short-term "effects" of media

content and by and large are incapable of resolving questions of cumulative media effects. Phenomenological inquiry, however, through direct observation of audiences constituting themselves as audiences (cf. Schutz, 1962. 230-31) may yield more incisive information. The Gerbner and Gross (1976; 191-94) finding of a "scary world" conception of reality among heavy TV viewers is entrancing: to some extent, behavioralist research can tell us, individuals' social reality is influenced beyond what its social indicators can explain.[4]

A basis for phenomenological inquiry into media was provided in 1922 by a prophetic observer, Walter Lippman:

> The real environment is altogether too big, too complex, and too fleeting for direct acquaintance. And although we have to act in that environment, we have to reconstruct it on a simpler model before we can manage with it. The analyst of public opinion must begin, then, by recognizing the triangular relationship between the scene of action, the human picture of that scene, and the human response to that picture working itself out upon the scene of action (1960. 15-16).

Lippman was sensitive to the phenomenon of a public mind, and to the importance of its human constituents. Phenomenological sociology is a way of vitalizing those concerns in the study of media.

Notes

[1]See Wagner (1970: 5).

[2]"The Social Construction of Reality" is the title of a book by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann which relies heavily on Schutz.

[3]Differentiation between various brands of phenomenological inquiry is beyond the scope of this paper, and several accounts are available which do so. See especially Solowski and Daley (1977), and the Wilson, Denzin and Zimmerman and Weider chapters in Douglas (1970).

[4]This paper has specifically focused on communicators and here gives passing comment on audiences; the phenomenologically-grounded analysis of content, generally under the rubric of hermeneutics, is the subject of another paper in these sessions (Christians and Grossberg, 1978).

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ADDENDA:

Christians, Clifford G. and Lawrence Grossberg, "Hermaneutics and the Study of Communications." Paper presented to the Qualitative Studies Division, Association for Education in Journalism convention, Seattle, Aug. 14, 1978.

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